

Twelve Minutes to Eleven by **CuriousNymph**

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Summary: When Eleven turned eleven, all she knew was sterility. As time went by, she learnt the meaning of love. And she loved a boy named Mike Wheeler.

Twelve Minutes to Eleven

Hello, folks! And here we have another offering from yours sincerely.

After being sick for the past week (please imagine piles of tissues), I decided to binge watch Stranger Things, cause I'd been seeing stuff all over Tumblr and Instagram and I don't know what else about some dude named Steve Harrington, and couldn't figure out what the big deal was.

Suffice to say, I decided to watch it, and it was definitely one of the best sick weeks I've had - the story was insane!

And the ships, people! Mike and Eleven floored me with how beautifully structured their relationship was. I also have a very soft spot for some Nancy and Jonathan, so you may or may not see some stuff about them up here in the future.

Nevertheless, I'm super glad I delved into that world for a week, so came up with this little thing when I was considering how the characters might have changed by season 3 - possibly very attractive and mature? I don't really know, I just want more antics from the gang. And Dad Steve. I think everybody could do with more Dad Steve.

Whatever the case, I'll take this opportunity to give a quick apology to anyone whose being hanging off their seats waiting for stuff to update! 'A Selcouth Winter' has SERIOUSLY fallen to the wayside, but considering it's now December, that may yet change... and as for the sequel to 'The Double Life of Peter Parker' - I'm sorry, dudes, but that might not be around for a longer time than originally predicted. It's all very sketchy in my mind right now, what with general life also happening alongside, so don't hang around waiting for me! Go enjoy life and maybe you'll get a notification email one of these days...
laughs

I have a playlist created for this piece - it's predominantly 80's stuff, but some 90's and modern stuff has filtered its way in, simply because it just really, really suits. Stick with Bananarama and Flock of Seagulls for this one, people. The lyrics are very relevant. You can

find it here:

[user/ingenioussprite/playlist/6svS806sm4KzAEIabKczMX](https://user.ingenioussprite/playlist/6svS806sm4KzAEIabKczMX)

Anyways, thanks for reading that very lengthy notes section and please enjoy this little fic I came up with at 11pm, for about three days straight. Reviews, as you all well know, are highly, highly appreciated.

I.

When Eleven was eleven, all she could remember was the feeling of sterility.

The laboratory had always been a place in which feeling was generally abolished – it was never a spontaneous place. Experiments, despite their name, whether never really experimental. They were planned, and executed.

And in some cases, death wasn't all that big of a lie either.

They always said she'd never die, but she never believed them.

Eleven was young, so feeling was raw. It always was when you were young – but nobody had ever really told her that, so she had to realize it herself.

Her speech was limited, and her feelings were too. She'd scream and kick and plead to be freed from the place they'd locked her away in, and no matter how the sounds reverberated, they never let her go.

Sterility – she felt that was the best word for it now, looking back – had been her life. To cage herself in, and say nothing about anything, and be left to concern herself with the *idea* of freedom, or love, rather than remember the experience. She had no idea what any of those things even meant. How could she have, anyway? She wasn't an experiment in being human.

She was an experiment in being a weapon.

II.

When Eleven turned twelve, she met a boy.

He seemed very strange, actually, but then again, she had met a lot of strange people.

The rain had pelted down on her, cold and unforgiving, like needles and bites on her skin, and the three people in front of her stared in confusion, huddled in coats and jackets and any number of types of clothing – in a stark contrast to her vibrant, yet measly, t-shirt.

The one in the middle – she couldn't quite see him, but he seemed to be the one most fascinated by her.

They took her with them – sat her down, made her feel safe. They asked questions, and smiled, and tried to make sense of her. They looked, and whispered, and pointed.

Eleven wasn't sure what to think – but that boy again.

His name was Mike. That she did know.

Eleven had always been quiet – there had never been much room for a lot of noise in her small room back at the laboratory. She'd always believed that noise only resulted in anger, as per experience.

This didn't seem to be the case here. Not yet, anyway.

As time passed, her days with these boys became almost precious to her – her most precious on record, as she tried to fight for them.

As she tried to fight for *him*.

Eleven knew all too well that she'd never had this feeling before – everything before now had been cold, and unnerving. She'd been sterile, like a utensil that needed to be kept clean in order to serve its function. If anything, she'd always believed herself incapable of being anything other than afraid, alone, angry or lost.

She was experiencing safety, and maybe – just maybe – *hope*.

Mike Wheeler – strange, nerdy, honest, *kind* boy that he was – also happened to be very determined, and he seemed to be the most

determined about her: about keeping her safe; about keeping her close; about protecting her. About getting her away from the Bad Men who had made consistent efforts to rid her of her feeling.

To rid her of anything other than fear and obedience, and who had made her into the dog that didn't bark.

But too many things stemmed from it – more fear, more rejection, more danger. Creatures leapt from indiscernible shadows; blood dripped down from her nose more times than she ever cared to remember; the lights flickered, the wheels turned, the roads lengthened, the dynamic changed.

If the Monster needed quelling, then by hell she was going to do it.

But there was this odd feeling she couldn't break away from, even hours after it happened.

Mike. He'd –

Well, Eleven wasn't really sure what he'd done.

One minute, he'd been talking about some dance or something, fumbling with his words as he tried to figure out how best to describe it. She'd been watching intently, glancing over his simple polo shirt and nervously tapping fingers on the table, and looked right at his eyes, which were staring rather intently down at the floor, dark lashes curling against his cheeks.

And then he'd just leapt up, leant forward, and placed his mouth on hers, just for the briefest of seconds.

Eleven had jumped back, staring right back at him, but she'd felt some sort of tingly heat spreading across her cheeks, as the smile slipped up onto her face before she'd even realized it. Sometimes, she thought, smiles weren't really supposed to be something you noticed you'd done.

She hadn't had much to smile about in the past.

Mike had said that his family would be able to provide for her – to give her a home with him. Where she'd have a family, and her

friends, and Mike. A place where'd she never have to worry about the laboratory or the Upside Down ever again.

Looking back, Eleven wished he'd been able to keep that promise.

III.

When Eleven turned thirteen, she didn't really know what she was doing anymore.

It had been 20 days since she'd seen Mike, and she had a nasty feeling that that number would only increase as time went on.

Even if she had defeated the Demogorgon – or strange, faceless monster (whatever they were calling it) – and even if she had escaped from the Upside Down not that long afterwards, it still stood that Eleven was once again on her own.

It wasn't something she was unused to – surrounded by people, as she had been in the laboratory, still wasn't the same as actually being *with* people, so their company had better resembled being alone. They'd been cold and unresponsive to her pain; to them, she hadn't really been a person. Just a somebody who could be downgraded to a something if it meant they could get through their work, if *she* was doing something otherworldly.

She hadn't much liked that sensation. Having her pain dismissed by others had been painful in itself.

Of course, you could dismiss your own pain, and think nothing of it. But when you wanted people to listen to you, to understand how painful it *really* was? People turning their backs was like being slapped in the face and pushed to the ground, and told to 'deal with it'.

She'd often felt like a problem, then an issue, then a subject, and then just a body.

Thankfully, she hadn't been dehumanized further than that.

But even if she was used to it, it hurt more now that she *knew* what it felt like to be *loved*.

It had been all kinds of love before she'd even known what that meant.

Lucas and Dustin had been friendly, genuine love – the kind of compassion and care for someone who they knew felt as outcast as they did. They'd been honest with her – they'd never lied. That had always been the pact. Never lie, and we can be friends.

She'd liked that rule.

Will had been different. He'd seen the horrors she'd seen; felt it inside him, writhing like an unwanted snake around your legs, and he'd looked at her once, only to confirm that she knew, better than anyone, how he felt. The Upside Down provided people with a very acute, individual experience, and an understanding of what true fear was, when the demon of your childhood nightmares crept around behind you, like the stalker you never knew you had.

Will had known that. Eleven had known that. Though he'd never talked to her – because he'd been embroiled in his own haunting version of reality – he'd seen her in the Upside Down, as she'd visited him in her mind, and that one look had proved everything for her. Will had been an honest love.

But then there was Mike.

Mike had been different.

Mike had always been different.

From day one, he'd always treated her like she was the most precious thing in the world. He'd known she was special, and that they had to look after her. He'd trusted her unashamedly, even if he often couldn't understand her. He'd looked at her like she was every dream he'd had about magic brought to life right before his very eyes, and despite all the crazy, weird, often frightening shit that was going on around them, he still could see a beauty to her terrible, enthralling, terrifying power.

Eleven was a powerful name. Just a number; a double one; a simple word. And yet she gave it meaning, and made it an unforgettable

name, as one would want it to be.

Mike had been everything to her. His soft, black hair, and unapologetic smile, and continuous optimism. His emotions worn on his jumper sleeve, his tears spilling down his face, his sulky frown when he wasn't allowed to do what he felt was right. He was gentle and unassuming, but also unabashedly loud and outright geeky, but he'd been everything she could have wanted from someone. He'd been her first proper friend.

And he was nowhere to be found.

It took time – Hopper became the only person left to her. Day 56. Day 67. Day 103. Day 234. Day 302. Day 345.

She'd lived in the same place, for the same times, for the same reasons, for nearly a year. She hadn't been sure how long she could take it for. She'd been torn from the things that mattered to her most, and yet...

Maybe, in some strange way, Hopper was right.

You're the last thing he needs right now.

Whatever the case, she didn't really care either way.

She had to go back to her home.

The days counted by. Things happened. The lab happened. The demodogs happened. The stupid idiots in the laboratory happened. Eleven's escapade into Illinois happened.

Meeting her sister happened.

That had thrown her a little bit. She'd thought maybe that could've worked, but it had only taken one photo and a stocked block of guilt for her to decide that no, this wasn't her, and no, she didn't plan on becoming somebody like that anytime soon.

So she went home again.

To Hawkins.

It had been a long trek, really. Eleven had come to realize that, despite everything she had learned, the world was still too big to learn everything in it, and by far – she had barely learned anything, considering what she'd just seen.

Hawkins was small, yes – but it was home.

But that part had been the hardest part. Trying to convince herself that she needed to see this through, instead of running away, tempting as it was.

She supposed she was just too brave for her own good.

But, of course, any sense of steel-enforced resignation she'd tried to hold in herself as she readied for whatever came – it all fell apart the minute she saw his face again.

It was everything she could have hoped to see – something that, for 353 days, she'd wished to see the whole time.

Mike's face was something she'd never seen before – *raw*. Completely and utterly broken, as he finally caught a glimpse of her from the doorway. It was like watching sparklers make patterns in the dark, cold air; it was like seeing fireworks in your eyes; it was like seeing stars burst and galaxies form and explode and crumble to dust.

It was like seeing the love of your life on the edge of the universe, ready to greet you in death.

He'd grown since she'd last seen him. He'd become somewhat different – his hair was thicker, his freckles a little more prominent – but also somehow more grown up. His shoulders weren't so small, his figure not so slight. He'd gained an inch or so, she thought.

His dark eyes had gained years.

It was all a rush – a flush of heat and then everything at once. Everything, everything, everything.

His words in her ear, his arms wrapped around her, his tears smudging her eye makeup. It was everything she had ever wanted.

He'd pulled back, almost as if to discern how much of a dream she might be before he could accept it was reality – she was here, and he was with her.

"I never gave up on you," he said, and Eleven's heart jumped a little again.

353. 353.

Eleven, eleven, eleven.

It all added up.

He was for her, to be with her, to be there for her.

Mike Wheeler was hopelessly in love with her, and even she could see it.

He couldn't bear to let her go again.

That much was evident from his yells behind the closed door, as Hopper had furiously pulled him into the room to quell his temper. His cries were broken and infuriated, as if he couldn't believe how easily she'd slipped through his fingers. He couldn't believe that he could have held her, and been with her, and listened to her, and talked to her, all those times before, and in reality, not have been able to do any of it. He had been so close, and she winced as she heard his voice break, the tenor shrieking as he screamed at Hopper for being such a filthy liar for keeping her from him.

Eleven didn't agree with that. This wasn't Hopper's fault – not entirely.

The laboratory was to blame – they were the ones who had separated them at first, and had continued to make it implausible for them to continue on seeing each other over the past year they had lost, both at the same time but without the other.

They'd lost each other, and found each other so quickly at the start.

Eleven wasn't sure what to think of any of it.

All her pain and anger got channelled, piece by piece, as she finally closed the gate, and in some instances, maybe she thought that was it.

That was certainly how she'd felt when she'd walked through those doors at the school gym.

Hopper had spent an ungodly amount of time trying to figure out how to do her makeup, before Joyce had snapped up the eyeshadow and done her eyes like they'd been when she'd arrived, except 'more her'. Joyce was one of those rare people who could make you smile despite seeing all the horrible things in the universe, since she herself had faced innumerable fears and atrocities in her own lifetime.

She rather liked Joyce, in that she'd never, ever doubted her.

She'd let Nancy do her hair, just to see how an older girl might do it, but she'd left her with lingering words that rang in her ears and made her blush at the mere idea of it:

He honestly can't keep his eyes off you.

She wasn't entirely sure what that meant, because she knew fairly well that Mike had looked at other things before, but the knowing way Nancy had quirked her lips had meant that it was *absolutely* to do with how he'd kissed her the first time.

Hopper hadn't been sure how to feel about all of it – he'd adopted her long enough to care about her as if she were his own, and he'd taken extra care to talk her through every rule again before they'd arrived at the school's doors.

"And no funny business." He had pointed a solemn finger, raising an eyebrow.

Eleven had raised one in return.

"Funny... business?" she'd asked.

"Mmmhmm," he'd muttered, turning to look out the windscreen with a concentrated effort as he gripped the wheel. He paused.

"No, kid. Just – look after yourself." He'd turned to her. "And have fun." He'd leant forward and pressed a kiss to her hair, to which she'd swatted away his hands as he'd laughed, Eleven mumbling something about mussing up the carefully placed curls.

And then she'd stepped through.

That all felt like a blur now. She'd looked up at the hanging lights, and glittering streamers, and the dozens of people in front of her. She imagined this was what it felt like to be a singular fish in a shoal of others. There, but not entirely definable amongst the mass.

Clearly someone across the room didn't share that sentiment.

She'd caught his eye across the room, and he'd looked at her like he was only seeing her for the first time. She had blinked, and smiled, and thought, carefully –floating past her mind- :

Oh. So this is how it feels to be looked at like you're everything.

He'd come up, all dark lashes and embarrassed smiles, and he'd carefully taken her hand, palm warm from the heat of the gym hall, and something else, she thought –

Nerves?

Maybe.

It had all been a very whirlwind experience, and then he'd leaned in to kiss her again, this time a little more careful than before, as if he knew this wasn't a trial run, to see how she felt. He knew how she felt.

He'd always known.

It was warmer this time – more intimate, despite how they were surrounded by people. It was gentle, and sincere; a soft press that still made his cheeks flare and heart pound. It was essentially everything she'd come to associate with Mike, the sort of kind, nurtured soul who would never dare harm anything if he knew it could be important or special.

She'd seen him so many times before, but he'd never looked more content; he looked like the whole world would be as well crumbling away, because he had her in his arms, and for the first time, he wasn't letting her go without a fight.

Maybe that had been the first real time she'd convinced herself.

Mike Wheeler was in love with her.

IV.

The day Eleven turned fourteen was the day she turned into a high school student.

It had been a tumultuous experience she'd had so far, for sure, but maybe she needed some normalcy for a change, just to try and balance things out.

Mike had been on edge the whole time, fingers going at a hundred miles a minute as he tried to count off everything she could possibly need to know, possess or remember before she attended her first day.

He was still Mike, of course. His unruly hair remained unruly, and his big, open smile was always the same. After being formally adopted by Hopper, life had slowed down a little more than was usual, so seeing Mike was a little easier, if also a little more infrequent. Hopper was as much a protector as Mike had been those two years ago.

Whether or not they were officially dating was certainly a big question in the forefront of her mind.

The concept had only recently been alighted to her, by Max, who had explained that the term sort of came from setting dates to hang out with each other. Why that had to be particularly different from what she was currently doing with Mike didn't make any sense. So Max clarified.

It was more like a constant stream of the Snow Ball over a period of time – perhaps forever, if anyone was ever that lucky.

That had made her stop.

So -?

She decided to stop thinking about it.

The first day at school didn't go too badly.

The third day was alright too.

The 5th day wasn't so great.

It had come to Eleven's attention that, despite the fact that Mike had told her that her shaved hair was no less attractive than her own, unruly curls, her hair was still an oddity amongst the sea of long, sheet-like hair that seemed to shift around the school, as the throngs of girls huddled together. The only people who seemed to have any sympathy for her were the black girls of the class, who wore their afros and curls with a pride she wished she had. They knew what it was like to be bullied for the most minuscule of things – they were some of the few who told her she looked great, even when the rest considered it a real blemish on her image.

Eleven had never much cared for images, but it didn't mean she didn't get angry about it.

One thing had led to another, and soon enough, she'd found herself out in the grounds, other kids obviously running past as they conducted their own games, as Eleven battled it out against the girls hell-bent on making her life a torment.

They'd yanked her newly forming curls, called her an assortment of colourful names which Eleven hadn't understood (but could decipher the tone of well enough to get their meaning) and eventually turned to picking her out on her so-called fondness for Mike.

"Ah, so Sheep-head and Frog-Face hang out together then? How perfect – the uglies can stick together, then. I bet *he* even hates your hair,"

Eleven had scrunched her nose up at that, knowing full well it wasn't true.

Mike had told her countless times that she'd always looked fine. And

hey, anyway, her looks weren't the point; she was a good person. That's what *really* mattered.

But Mike wasn't here, and words could still sting if they hit the heart right.

The last words from the girl's mouth had been venomous:

"I bet your mum doesn't even care about you enough to get you to shave it all off – but then I guess you'd look like a prisoner,"

Something in her had cracked – a quick, jerking feeling in her gut – and she'd thrown her hand up, sending the girl flying down to the concrete, whacking her elbow off the ground and fracturing the bone. Eleven knew that's what had happened, anyway – she could always tell when she'd done damage.

The guilt had flared up in her face as she'd felt the blood dripping down her mouth, just as the girl had started shrieking 'Freak!' up at her, and the teachers had hauled her away.

She'd been reprimanded for sure, but it had all blown over as just an accident.

Later that night, Mike had pulled her aside.

"Are you OK?"

Eleven had stared up at him, watching his dark eyes watch hers, moving in such a way to show he was observing her expression more so than her eyes alone.

"...Yes." She'd muttered in return, but she hadn't been entirely sure whether or not she meant it.

Mike had shifted on the spot, rubbing the back of his neck in fraught concern.

"You know, you can't really do that."

"Do what?" Her sharp tone had returned at that point.

Mike froze, backtracking.

"Well, hurt people. Like, you can't hurt people back, even if they hurt you."

Eleven's eyes had narrowed. What had that meant anyway? That she couldn't defend herself? Did that mean she'd been learning to fight just so that she could go to school and be walked over by everybody?

"Why?" Her tone had turned harsh.

Mike's expression had cleared, his brow furrowing as he considered how best to explain it. He'd always been so serious, but she'd loved that about him.

"Well... even if someone does something, you hurting them will only get you in trouble too. So, it's just causing more problems than solving them, I guess."

"So I just... *stand* there?" She had frowned back harder at that comment, making Mike flail about in panic at her darkened stare, and place a comforting hand on her shoulder, leading her to the table.

"No! No, not like that. You just... you just leave it. If you hurt them back, you're generally no better than them. Just take the moral high ground, or something. That's what Nancy says, anyway."

Eleven had stared at the grooves in the table, watching how her nails fit into the slits perfectly. Mike's hand joined hers, wrapping his fingers into her own, like threading laces through his worn, white converse. She still wore them nearly every day. He hadn't asked for them back, so she didn't plan on returning them.

"It's weird, I know – but, I guess... I guess it's just how it is. It gets better, I promise. You don't get bullied forever." He had paused, scrunching up his brow. "Actually, standing up to them once – *without* telekinesis -" He'd widened his eyes at this afterthought, "-That usually makes them stop. But just so long as you're not violent – otherwise you'll get in trouble."

Eleven had never really been used to having to control her emotions.

She was too emotionally charged for that.

There were days where she was beginning to wonder if a life like this was worth having.

At least with her friends here, she could manage.

At least with Mike here, she would manage.

V.

By the time Eleven turned fifteen, many things had changed.

She'd been living with Hopper for nearly two years, all without incident. Although Will had still been suffering bravely through the PTSD of his time in the Upside Down, he'd managed to overcome the worst, now able to fully join in with the Party.

Eleven had never felt luckier in her whole life.

She'd always wanted to be the Princess. She'd been deemed the Mage by Mike, as wielder of magic and all things weird in their ongoing campaign, and for all the others to come. She liked the idea of it being something that others would step back in awe of.

But all her life, even when she knew it wasn't a possibility anymore, she'd wanted to be a princess.

The idea had always had its draws. Eleven had spent most of her life fighting her own battles, and whilst that afforded her a lot of individuality and independence, it also meant that she'd never known what it was to have someone step in those shoes for her.

Her new friends had done it many times over since they'd met, but it had never been in the romantic sense.

Since becoming Hopper's officially, legalised daughter, she'd been given the opportunity to start living like a normal, teenage girl. For many people, that would have meant makeup and music and pretty dresses and dating.

For Eleven, that meant Disney movies, books and Mike.

Disney had been something Will had introduced her to, as something he held himself very close to. Stories of daring do and secret princesses and dashing princes and eye-popping magic and all kinds of crazy creatures: they were all things that made her feel like she was watching a kaleidoscope of colour and shape. And after seeing Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella, she was beginning to think that maybe this was what she'd wanted, just once, in her life. For some romance to sweep her off her feet, and for once not involve a nosebleed and splitting headache, and a fistful of anger always itching in her palm, desperately trying to control her.

She'd been so angry and upset at the world for the way it had been treating her, and if anything, Eleven had hoped to get revenge on it one day.

But when people like Mike were around, maybe she didn't need any revenge after all.

However, it had only taken one look at Aurora's golden locks and she'd instantly wanted the blonde wig back, and then –

Well, the teasing about her hair had died down, and was all but completely gone, but it still made her even more self-conscious than she ever remembered being about her appearance.

So she went to Nancy about it.

Nancy had been, once again, someone who left a lasting impression upon you. When she'd first seen her, she'd been a nail-bat-wielding-fanatic, as desperate as the next person to get justice for those who had been wronged. She'd been kitted out in cords and a jacket, her hair messy but practical, yet lipgloss still in a perfect order.

She'd been wary of her, but had liked her.

Nowadays, since the Shadow was taking a break (though for how long, Eleven had not wanted to dwell on), Nancy was outfitted in her more traditional attire: soft sweaters, loose hair, and pretty pink lipstick once again.

But, Eleven – being the observant, shy person she was – had

recognized a steely resignation in her eyes, that often lit up into a rebellious fire anytime anyone ever claimed Nancy was 'typical'. Why that had been an insult, Eleven didn't know, but Nancy was always down for a fight when that word came up.

She guessed it was something to do with Jonathan, but she'd been shrewd enough not to ask about it.

"Nancy," Eleven had asked, opening her door to find her at her desk, slowly scanning her textbook for an answer as she twirled her pen absent-mindedly. She came home as often as she could from university, but when she did, work followed her back too.

Her head had whipped up, the soft waves of her hair thrown over her shoulder.

"El! Is everything OK?"

Eleven had nodded.

"Yes,"

"Oh," Nancy's eyes blinked rapidly, as she often did when she was confused.

"I have a question,"

"Oh." She said it again, although with more understanding in her tone this time. Nancy motioned to the bed, clearly ready to hear whatever it was she had the burning desire to ask.

Although Eleven had gotten herself used to the idea of being open about how she felt, and just saying as she felt, there were often times where she found it difficult to articulate what she needed to say. She had only just been getting to grips with a wider vocab, just from learning to read and speak more fluidly, but Mike had always told her she was pretty good, after spending so many years extracted from books. He was on a personal campaign to get her to read The Lord of the Rings trilogy, even if it killed him.

"I love questions. Fire away,"

Eleven had swallowed, wondering how best to phrase it. She'd always wanted to be a princess – but would Nancy know what she meant when she said she wanted to be a princess for other people too? Was that even a thing?

"I want to be pretty," Maybe that was the best way to put it.

Nancy had stopped twirling her pen, eyebrow raising in further confusion.

"What?"

"I want to be pretty. For Mike,"

Nancy's face had cracked into a huge smile – the kind that Eleven had seen Jonathan grin at, just before he kissed her. It was something that always made her heart leap; watching other people kiss always made her want to try it again someday.

"Oh, right. El, you don't need to worry about that, trust me."

"But why not?" The confusion had been overwhelming. Was it somehow outlawed to want to be pretty for someone?

Nancy's smile had become softer, as she came to sit cross-legged in front of her, eyes sincere and lips curled in a wry but tender smile. She always looked ridiculously pretty when she did that.

"El... being pretty shouldn't be – *isn't* – the point of everything. You get that, right?"

"But -"

"Look, I get it. For a while, it might seem like everything. But honestly – if this is about Mike, you really don't need to worry. He looks at you like you hung the moon – which is entirely possible in his eyes, by the way."

Eleven had blushed profusely at that point, remembering how he'd kissed her back at the Snow Ball. There had been glittering baubles like moons hanging everywhere. She could have hung those herself, she'd thought, if she'd had enough patience to.

Nancy's hand had come up to rest on her shoulder, other running through her now suitably out-of-control, dark brown curls. Despite her tamed look in the past, the curls were its natural state and she'd often been too lazy to rectify it.

"You have gorgeous hair, El. But Mike doesn't like you for your hair – he likes you for *you*. Just be as you've always been. It'll be fine. I promise."

Eleven had paused, conscious of that one word – the word she'd shared with him for so many years now.

"Promise?"

Nancy Wheeler had smiled in return, fluffing her curls affectionately.

"Promise."

It was only in the basement when Eleven realized exactly how much had changed, though, when she saw Mike that afternoon.

It had been no surprise to find that people had changed as she had changed. Hopper had rather awkwardly explained it as a universal thing everyone went through at this stage – he'd pulled at his collar as she'd asked about the mysterious blood she'd found one day, nearly a year ago, on her pants, and he'd promptly called Joyce to help rectify that situation long before she'd even had time to ask what it was called. Since then, Joyce and Nancy had almost been tutoring her on what it meant to grow up – what all the weird changes were about. It had frightened her at first; she'd been perfectly content just being as she was. But now, with all the physical changes less of a challenge, the emotional ones were playing up, along with some fuzzy heat she got in her stomach every time she even glanced at Mike.

Whatever that was, it made her feel a little embarrassed, although over what, she had no idea.

The basement had become a sort of sanctuary for her, ever since she'd officially been let loose of her house arrest by Hopper. While the man meant well – probably better than everybody – she'd been near ready

to bolt out the front door as he'd held her under strict rules nearly two years ago, determined that she still remain at home, and alternate between the homes of Mike, Will, Lucas and Dustin, without complaint. That was about as much freedom as he'd been willing to give her. It'd been frustrating, but at least she'd been allowed to see Mike, for a change. At least she'd been allowed to see *people*.

Nowadays, with no immediate threat on the horizon, – despite how she could feel the shadow hunting the corners of the void in her mind, like hearing static from the television in another room – Eleven had been sure that things would calm down. She'd been entirely wrong.

She looked in the mirror, and almost couldn't recognize herself. Her shape was different, her features were less rounded. She still looked overtly, very young, but she also looked like she was losing her innocence. It showed on her face.

Maybe it was all those romance movies she'd been watching.

(What could she say, she was a sucker for a love story.)

But some days, she'd sit forever and wonder how – if at all – a love story would play out between her and Mike.

Like any girls in the school, they'd all gasp and joke about how their own fantasies might play out. *Whisked off to magical land. Taken to the big dance. Rode off into another adventure on horseback. Lived in another century.*

Every, single idea made Eleven's mind pop like freshly opened fizzy drink, the bubbles blooming to the surface as she imagined herself in all manner of situations, but it didn't matter how she tried. Her and Mike had already lived a story far removed from those whimsical, fantastical imaginings, and she was no Princess in them.

She'd been a warrior.

She'd looked like a boy and fought battles and stood up for herself, even if she'd cowered in fear and been afraid of rejection and abandonment from those she thought she could trust.

She really hoped that, one day, they'd write a story like that.

She really, really hoped that they did.

Nevertheless, staring at the begrudging grooves in the table, she carelessly flipped through the pile of books she had stacked beside her, sitting cross-legged in the chair, a glass of abandoned OJ beside her. These books provided even more of a jump into fantasy, but she often found she always turned back to Anne of Green Gables – the story Hopper had read to her as a younger self, back when he'd first taken her in.

She could see herself in Anne. Feisty, stubborn Anne, with her crazy hair and quick tongue, partnered with the dark-haired, gentle Gilbert Blythe.

She always smiled at the comparison.

Just as she'd turned to the next page again, skimming for her favourite paragraph, a sound on the basement stairs made her jump and whirl around in her chair to find the source of the noise.

It was Mike.

As of late, despite her own changes, Mike had been changing in ways she'd never imagined. He still remained as the geeky, nerdy, awkward, shuffled-his-feet-when-unsure kind of boy, who had always jumped into danger to help people. He'd had no real need to do much jumping, however, so he'd been perfectly content to mope about as his mum nearly wrestled him up to every family breakfast, weekend lunchtime and dinner, as he grew less fond of being treated like a child, and made to sit at the table when he didn't want to.

Eleven, however, had dismissed all this when she looked at his hair, Anne of Green Gables feeling weightless in her hands as he came down the rest of the steps.

"Whatcha doing?" He asked casually, voice a tone deeper than it had been in the past. It had been funny, as she'd heard the four boys' voices break into squeaks like a badly timed harmony choir, their voices betraying them in class, but that had all settled down now,

and Mike had been left with a voice not unlike that of an 80's pop star, all smooth vowels and soft consonants. She'd often attributed it to the taste of honey; the first time she'd taken a spoonful, at Mrs Wheeler's insistence, when she'd been making cookies one day, had been insane. The golden liquid had coated her teeth and filled her mouth with a sticky, sugary texture that reminded her only slightly of Eggos, but with a more permanent aftertaste on her tongue. It had sent her sideways and she'd loved it on her cereal (and indeed, Eggos) since.

Mike's voice sounded like that. Like honey to her ears.

She hadn't told him this, of course.

But now she wasn't so sure it was his voice sending her a little light-headed.

What the hell had happened to his hair?

"El?" Said honeyed voice asked in confusion, eyebrows shooting up his forehead as he stared at her, looking from the book to her stilled fingers on the pages, to the definitive stare she was shooting him across the room.

Eleven continued to stare.

Mike's hair – much unlike her own – had been a floppy, silky mess, ebony black and completely uncontrollable, as Mrs Wheeler had furiously combed it into some semblance of order for the Snow Ball. Now, though –

Well, it wasn't floppy - *that* was for sure.

Eleven couldn't contain herself as she slowly got up, setting Anne to the side as she stepped forward and reached up to feel the newly styled curls. The locks had been twisted and coiled into a crazy rendition of her own hairstyle. His hair looked soft and bouncy, stray curls falling across his eyes and tumbling down his head, his dark eyes blinking out from beneath the headdress of hair in confusion.

"El, what's the matter?" Even his clothing had changed. His cosy, intriguingly patterned jumpers still remained, but he wore a more

slim-line navy one today, a dark shirt underneath, his cords on today with his converse. Not the white ones – she was wearing them with her dungarees instead, a stripy shirt on underneath – but some bright red ones, the laces a little messy and falling out.

"Your hair," she muttered, running her hands through the curls. Mike's face had suddenly lit up red at her touch, and he looked down at her, his newly discovered height of 5'7 making her 5'4 a little hard to keep up.

What had happened to him? Eleven wasn't sure she was happy with these changes happening so fast.

But then again...

"Oh, yeah," he reached up a hand and felt it lightly with his palm, testing the volume. "I got it permed. I thought I should try something different. Do you... like it?" The hesitance in his voice had been very endearing; an almost shy question that made his dark lashes curl on his cheeks again as he dipped them in embarrassment. His smile was faltering, shoulders a little curled in by the attention.

Eleven nodded once, stepping back to look at him.

"Yes," she murmured, already feeling her own heat rise to her cheeks, face warming at the idea of possibly kissing him right there and then.

Mike had blinked, letting loose a sharp, joyous laugh, just as he jumped past her and pulled out a wad of comics, slapping them on the table beside her novels. The contrast was clear to see between the two of them. Similar, yet slightly different.

"Here," he'd taken her hand, although it felt very different from the first time. His hands were overall a good deal larger than hers, his fingers long and pale, dusted with dark freckles like on his face. He set her back in her chair, flipping through the comics, pulling out different ones as he skim read the pages, clearly looking for something. Eleven continued to survey him, wondering how gawky Mike had now become pretty Mike. That had happened too fast.

He looked up, a shit-eating grin plastering his face, and she saw the

gawky side come out again, still as gentle and cheerful as she'd always known him to be.

"Here, look. How about we act out the comics? You can choose anyone you like – I won't mind,"

He pulled his chosen ones away, bringing them over to the floor further away from the table, settling down on the raggedy carpet with them, the basement light soft and warm. Eleven followed, absently touching her own hair. Her own curls had always been a source of fascination for her, but nowadays, she often wondered how much the trouble was worth. Combing it was a nightmare, and now Mike had gone and decided that's what he wanted from his own hair.

Maybe she ought to shave hers again.

As she sat down in front of him, fingering the corner of one of the comics, she had already decided to say something.

"Do you like my hair?"

Mike had been looking through the comics intently, now glancing up to see her face contorted in concentration, as if trying to use her gift to manipulate the magazines in front of her.

"Huh?"

Eleven looked at him huffily.

"My hair. Do you – do you like my hair?"

Mike blinked once, letting a hand come up and run through his own new, untameable curls again, in some self-conscious gesture of unfamiliarity. It had been a notoriously strange decision for him to make, usually the first one to complain when his mum had ever suggested doing something with his hair. But then he'd decided, no – you know what, screw it. *I'm going to make an effort this time. If Dustin could manage to achieve Steve's hairstyle in one night, I can permanently change mine in a few hours.*

When he'd seen it, his first thought had been that he looked like he'd come from a rock group.

His second thought had been: *Heck*.

As Eleven had continued to stare at him, she'd felt the bottom of her stomach grow hot, twisting into uncomfortable shapes as she'd watched him blink and brush his newfound curls from his face, as he'd looked at her for clarification of what she'd just asked.

"Do I like – your hair?" His voice couldn't really work its way around the phrase without cracking. Mike had swallowed carefully.

"Well, yeah -"

"I don't," Eleven had almost snapped in response, making Mike jump from where he was sitting, eyes widening in confusion. His voice had adopted a worried tone.

"What? Why? It's nice hair, El -"

"No, it's not." That had been a point blank statement on her part. It didn't matter that her friends had never said anything about it before. She'd see the girls in school, and even with ones on her side who knew the pain of having to try and deal with less than cooperative frizz, she'd still longingly looked at the hair on show and seen that every type of girl had the hair she'd dreamed of having. She didn't see any Disney Princesses with frizzy curls, that was for sure. They all had beautiful, blonde locks, waved and glossy. She knew it was just animation, but reality was imitating it, and maybe that's all she really cared about. She didn't care if she didn't fit in - but she did care how she looked, and maybe messy, bed-hair like hers wasn't making her feel great.

Mike's face had shifted into one of unspoken sympathy.

"El, look at me. I deliberately went and got *these* curls *here*," he pointed to his own birdcage of hair, spiralling out of control, black coils looking softer still in the warm, fuzzy light of the corner lamp, a bronze halo adorning the back of his head.

"Your hair's fine. Seriously. I love your hair. It's – it's *different*." Mike had reached out a tentative hand at that point, as if hesitating to see if she would accept. His palm found her cheek, smoothing the skin

under her eye with his thumb.

"Honestly. You look pretty, I promise." His smile reminded her of that time he'd seen her for the first time after 353 days. His eyes had been bright, mouth parted, hair a mess and smile such a genuine, lost thing – unable to comprehend her in that moment – that it had been the most gentle thing she'd seen in nearly a year. After so much hurt and anguish, Michael Wheeler's smile could restore life to a frozen heart, and he'd restored hope in hers.

Eleven shook her head slightly, even as she felt her breath quicken under his gaze.

"I hate it. I want it like – like -"

She struggled for the word – the right phrase – to properly explain what she meant.

"Like Aurora," Eleven winced, not sure that was the best way to describe it.

"No, not -" She tried again, but it was too late. Mike was already smirking, shaking his head a little.

"El, it's fine. Really. Your hair is fine. A Disney Princess isn't going to change that,"

Eleven stared at him blankly. How-?

"I used to watch Disney movies with Nancy – I still would, actually, but the guys aren't as invested in Sleeping Beauty as I was at 5."

"You liked... Sleeping Beauty?"

Mike shrugged, looking a little bashful, hand curling into her hair thoughtfully.

"Well, yeah. It was cool. There was a dragon in it. I liked dragons. But the dragon was evil, so... that didn't work out so much, but I didn't mind."

He'd been leaning in a little closer each time, eyes becoming hazy,

lips parted after each sentence, like he wasn't really concentrating on what he was saying, hands still curled into her hair with a conscious tenderness. Eleven wasn't sure what to do, her hands in her lap as she fumbled her fingers, paying closer attention to the floor than to his face, suddenly aware of how close he was. His lashes were long and thick up this close, but even though she'd seen them so many times, it still gave her heart a flutter.

"Mike?"

"Mmmmm?" His voice was a little breathy – something she'd never heard before. He looked positively estranged, still awkward and fumbling even when he was trying to be romantic.

"What are you doing?"

Mike blinked once, looking down at her, concern etched in his expression.

"Um. Well, I was -"

His sentence was cut off as Eleven leant forward, sealing his promise before he'd gotten the chance to answer her. The force was a little more than he'd expected, making him lean back a little as she pressed her mouth against his, still a little tentative with the motion.

It wasn't long before his arm came up around her waist.

VI.

Sixteen was the year Eleven meant the true meaning of music, even when Mike had been careful and patient to introduce her to all kinds of things over the years.

Have you gone to the park before? Do you know what chocolate cake tastes like? Have you ever seen the sunset?

This new world she was entering into was becoming more mind-boggling as she grew up, now a young woman rather than an innocent girl. She'd been a test subject for so long, she'd forgotten what it felt like to simply *live*, but her friends had shown her that.

Max had taught her how to throw a good punch. And how to skateboard. She'd said both were good in emergencies, a slight tension to her voice, but her smirk demanded that she knew it better than anyone, and wasn't afraid to show it.

Max had become a good friend over the years. She'd been by her side despite everything.

Lucas had shown her how to put up posters on the wall and how to go to the movies. They'd gone as a group to see all the new films that came out, on one occasion *The Princess Bride* being a particular favourite among them, despite many others dising its story. Eleven had loved it.

Dustin had shown her the best way to beat the bosses in the newest *Zelda* game, as he furiously punched the buttons at an alarming rate to try and get to the next part of the game. He'd cheered her on as she'd taken her turn, hugging her furiously in triumph when they defeated the monster. She felt like she'd succeeded at everything that day. They'd played videogames together ever since.

Will showed her how to decorate the Christmas tree that December, his family having a strange affinity for lights, after Joyce's hectic race to try and communicate with him in the *Upside Down*. The colour inside the house had been unbelievable, as the lights had twinkled, casting light and glitter into dazzling specks across the room, the scent of pine prevalent despite the smallish size of the tree itself. Eleven had promptly decided that Christmas was her favourite time of the year.

But Mike. Mike had taught her everything she could want.

But she'd never been taught how to dance. She'd never been taught what music was supposed to *do* for you.

Hopper had shown her some music one time – when they'd been redecorating the cabin. It had been an odd experience, but she'd enjoyed it nonetheless.

But music just for the sake of music. She had no idea what any of that was about.

She would often hear it in the shops, or as she walked past music stores in town with the boys, as they traipsed to the arcade, now old enough to do so without an escort. She couldn't understand the rhythms and couldn't pick up on the lyrics, the music too loud and the song too fast to keep up, but there was something undeniably catchy about the idea. She had often seen Nancy dancing around her room to it when she'd still lived in the house, not a care in the world to who saw her. She'd observed Mrs Wheeler moving around the kitchen in a quiet appreciation for the sound, as the music on the radio played, the newest songs coming up one after the other.

She'd seen it happen often enough to understand the purpose of it – to enjoy yourself. To immerse yourself in the story it told.

Just exactly what *that* was happened to be what she didn't know.

The basement had once again become a contemplation space for this, as she'd carried a bulky radio down to the basement, panicking at one point that she'd trip and fall flat on her face as she struggled down the stairs.

Once there, she'd pulled the aerial up and fiddled around with it, patiently waiting for the signal. It had come through eventually, and since then, she'd sat and listened to everything that came on, trying to understand what was being said.

Mike had traipsed in nearly two hours after she'd begun her experiment, staring intently at the radio, as if such a thing would enlighten her.

"Any particular reason why you're staring at a radio?" He'd smiled as he'd said it.

"Music," she'd said, rather bluntly, gaze not shifting from the circular speakers on the front. She was clearly too invested in the topic to be budged from her spot. The current track was some alternative rock song, which Eleven seemed to be enjoying, her foot absently tapping to the beat, despite her steely expression.

"O-K. Anything in particular you're looking for?"

She shook her head, still not moving from her spot on the carpet.

Mike frowned, just as he rushed off again, in pursuit of his own goal. Eleven, for once in her life, barely missed him leaving.

When Mike came back, he was heaving in what looked like a cassette player, clearly struggling under the weight one-armed as he fumbled for the banister on the stairs. When he finally collapsed into the basement, limbs flailing, he thunked it down on the carpet, and scrambled up the stairs again, his dark curls disappearing up through the hole.

When he came back again, Eleven had watched with a vapid curiosity as his arms dumped multitudes of cassette tapes onto the carpet beside her, budging up as he fumbled about through the pile for one in particular, eyebrows scrunching up in concentration. Eleven watched on in silence.

When he finally found the right one, Mike held it up in triumph, a smile adorning his face, making Eleven blush at the way it creased his dimples and made the freckles on his cheeks and nose glow in the soft light, as he held it above his head, reading the label to be absolutely sure.

"Got it," he said with enthusiasm, and he'd clicked it into the player, leg jiggling in anticipation as he fumbled with the switches on top.

Then, seemingly from nowhere, a crackly, if not smooth, sound came from the speakers, rolling over into Eleven's ears, making her jump back in surprise. Mike reached out a hand as he stood up, eyes alight with wonder.

"Come on – I'll show you how to dance."

Eleven had taken his hand, smile a quiet but distinct thing, curls obscuring her face. Mike still felt like he was seeing her anew every day.

When he'd taken her hand, he placed the other on his shoulder somewhat perfunctorily, like it was the Snow Ball again. His other hand found her waist, making Eleven squirm a little. Mike had

laughed, biting his lip.

"No, it's fine, really. It's Jazz music. It's supposed to be... close, I guess. Nancy says it's good if you're just wanting to dance a little." He shrugged. "She's the one who taught me." He began moving around her, urging her to come with him.

"See? Not bad, right?"

Eleven couldn't tear her eyes away from his face. He'd grown up so quickly – he no longer looked like the babyish Mike who'd pulled her in from the storm and fed her and clothed her. This Mike felt – comfortable. Like he knew his own skin now. He was still shy, still gentle. Still awkward and fidgety and nerdy and all manners of emotional, but he felt more confident. Like he knew what he wanted from life.

The dance seemed to make things fall away, as they concentrated on each other, and only each other. Eleven had always dreamed of being a princess, but maybe that hadn't been the best thing to aim for. Maybe just being herself was the best thing she could do for herself. She'd done things that she'd remember for the rest of her life – she'd actually killed people. She'd lashed out and said things she didn't mean and caused pain and done stupid things. But she'd learned. She'd grown. As far as Hopper told her, everybody did stupid, selfish things when they cared, or when they were hurting. She'd seen Mike do much the same – heard about his cavorting with danger in the year she'd been gone. Acting out, neglecting school, snapping at people, being a bit of shit friend.

But she forgave him for it. Because, just like her, he'd grown and learned and changed.

And with him, here, able to see some glint of what he'd be like as a young man – that was making her smile wider than ever.

The tape finished, and they kept going through them. All sorts. 80's pop, where they jumped about and danced separately and mouthed the words to each other, Human League and Bananarama and Level 42, shaking their heads to the beat and breathless by the end; 50's rock and roll, where they bopped about in synchronized swing mode,

twirling each other about like it was their Prom Night; 70's disco, all iconic moves and classic lines, as they turned up the volume and began singing out without a care.

Eleven had never felt more lost for breath by the end of it, happily sprawled on the carpet, Mike lying beside her, panting.

"That was...amazing," he said, closing his eyes in relief at the break.

"Yes." Eleven agreed.

How she wished she could've been that happy for that bit longer.

VII.

Eleven's seventeenth birthday was marked as the day the Shadow returned to their lives.

Although she'd certainly found out that her first, real birthday was in 1971, she hadn't felt like the *date* she'd actually been born resonated with her. So, deciding that it made the most sense to go for a date that *did* resonate for her, she picked November 7th :The day Mike, Lucas and Dustin found her and took her back to the Wheelers'. Since then, her birthday each year had been a simple but important affair – a time where she was made to feel special, when for years she'd felt like a dirty experiment locked away in a secretive, windowless cell, like something horrid that ought to be kept away from human eyes.

Each birthday involved all sorts of new things – a cake from Mrs Wheeler, baked exactly as she asked for. She'd been hesitant at first, a little cautious as to being so demanding for something that seemed so trivial (she could be highly demanding for things that mattered without issue), but Mrs Wheeler had insisted. Every year, she chose something different. Her seventeenth, she chose carrot cake, simply because it was a weirdly great cake despite how the name could often mar it before you tried it.

Then, there were always presents. She loved presents. But it wasn't so much the quantity that she looked forward to – it was the thought of them. Each person bought her something different, every time. That year, Hopper bought her a new notebook, as a way to record all her

new words of the day with all their meanings, and some nice pens to write it out with. She'd hugged him for about a full two minutes after she unwrapped it.

Nancy had provided her with an alarm clock, made in a pale blue coated metal, with proper working hammer and authentic ticking sound. She'd said she thought she'd appreciate something for her bedroom.

Dustin, Lucas and Will had all banded together to get her a selection of new t-shirts, and a bag covered in badges of all kinds, mostly of games and comics that they felt she would like. She'd pondered over each one fondly, asking what each thing was, to which the boys replied in fervent enthusiasm.

Jonathan decided that he'd band together with Mike, and not-so-nonchalantly help him choose a camera to buy for her.

Mike had been pondering over his idea for months, saving up as much as he could, knowing full-well it had to be something that she'd use for a long, long time. But when he'd come upon the idea of a camera, he'd had no idea where to start. So when Will had jumped in and suggested giving Jonathan a ring and asking him, over the phone, what type of camera to go for, Jonathan had come down and helped him out.

When Eleven had opened the gift, she had known, almost instantly, that it was one of the best things anyone had ever thought to give her.

Mike had been smothered in an air-tight hug immediately, making him pat her back to get her to leave off of him, but the blaringly happy smile on her face had been worth the few moments without air.

But it had all gone pear-shaped afterwards.

What Eleven had failed to mention was the fact that the Shadow, despite its quiet slumber in the Upside Down all the years before, had been mingling into her void to try and find a way into their world, without the rift ever having to be ripped open again. Eleven had

fought it in her dreams, and furiously shoved it back into the decaying land it so helplessly fed on, watching over everything, like a spider at the web watching the fly struggle in the silk. But soon enough, she'd found it too difficult to hold back, and it had finally broken through.

How it managed to make its way there, nobody really knew. Had it bled through her mind?

It turned out it had bled through her dreams.

Somehow, having psychic mind powers also meant that dreaming was not such an imaginary thing as one would hope, and whatever ideas implanted themselves in her head could very easily make their way into reality, if they left a big enough impression upon her.

One moment she'd been sitting watching a film with the boys, and then she'd dropped to the floor, skin turning blue like she was being drowned alive. The Shadow had been sapping her life-force, just enough to drag itself into existence into the Right Side Up -

And then she'd been fine.

Tired, but fine.

Mike had panicked, instantly smothering her in attention, the tension in his brow almost permanently creasing his eyebrows, but Eleven had been quick to soothe him, as she'd lain down on the sofa in the basement, a blanket carelessly thrown on top of her.

"Mike, it's fine -"

Mike shook his head firmly.

"Nothing about this is *fine*, El. It never has been. Why didn't you say something? Don't you – don't you *trust* me?"

The tears had been falling quickly by that point, staining his freckled cheeks with red tracks from his eyes, black hair a mess from sleeping beside her the whole time, before then refusing to go to sleep as he watched over her. His friends had been planning how best to take action in the other room all night, Hopper, Joyce, Nancy, Jonathan,

and unsurprisingly, the newest parent Steve dropping in -wielding his ever trusty nail-infested bat – trying to help them along. So far, the only idea seemed to be to vanquish the idea of the Shadow from their reality.

In other words, Eleven.

It was always Eleven.

Eleven had raised up a hand to his face, absently brushing away the permed curls that teased around his ears. Although he had had the perm for a while, it was beginning to fall out a little, his hair regaining some of that telling floppiness, so it better resembled confused waves on top of his head, not helped by the stubbornness of bed hair.

In reality, he was a tired, emotional mess at the moment, but he looked no worse for it.

"Didn't want you to worry," she said simply, evidently sending Mike into a whirlwind of emotional turmoil as he gathered her up in his arms, stroking her hair.

"I'm always going to worry, El. There's no point protecting me from stuff. I'm going to be a stubborn shithead no matter what's going on,"

Eleven had laughed against his bony shoulder, the sweater's wool rough against her cheek from being washed badly too many times. She didn't mind so much. It was one of the ones she liked best on him – a deep, rich, cherry red, that brought out a hazel and wine red in his irises, and made his cheeks glow.

When she pulled back, Mike leant his forehead against hers, their hair mingling. El's had gotten longer at one point, but she'd opted to cut it again, keeping it in her choppy, wavy bob, that made her wide, brown eyes look bright and intelligent.

"What are you going to do, then?" Mike had asked the question in trepidation, knowing full well it was going to involve a lot of fighting on her part. He knew she wasn't going to let him within walking distance of her when she did it, but then again, not much had

changed in that respect.

"Fight." She said it like a deliberate challenge, even as her fingers curled helplessly into the hair at his nape, knowing she would miss the warmth of his skin and the sight of his smile for a very long time, if this was her destiny.

Mike had swallowed carefully, nodding once in acknowledgement. Just as he'd guessed, then.

Fuck, he loved her for it.

"I can't lose you *again*, El. I just *can't*. Promise me – this time, you won't disappear, right?"

Eleven had wordlessly brought him closer to her, their noses brushing past each other as she felt his tears drop onto her cheeks, his breathing slow but ragged. She swallowed herself.

"Never," she whispered, just as she pressed a kiss against his mouth, slowly and carefully, like kissing flower petals.

In reciprocation, his hands had come up and cradled her to him, the kisses never desperate or wanting, but just familiar. Just *them*.

When the boys came down to find them, they'd found the two of them on the floor, wrapped up in each other, Eleven pressed against Mike in every conceivable place, the both of them still fully clothed but looking like they could very well have not been.

They'd been loath to part them, but it had had to be done.

Really, if anybody could have excused their loyalty and fidelity to each other, they would have been a fool.

But when they'd driven out to the main road – when they'd seen the monster looming in the clouds, red like hell and storms creating paths in the sky, they'd known that this was the hardest Mike had ever had to let her go.

But she'd walked out.

She'd opened the door of the car, and walked out, dressed in her black coat and checkered shirt and shorts, and knee-high socks and Mike's ratty, white converse, with her curly bob and nosebleed and smoky violet-grey eyeshadow, and she'd left them, walking alone, up to face the monster of her nightmares.

Mike had burst into tears on the road as he'd watched her go, crumbling to the ground, the three boys, all themselves crying, tumbling out of the car to drag him back in, and they'd watched their friend walk into Hell like she was strolling down the catwalk.

It was twelve minutes to eleven that morning.

For any of you crying: 'BUT WHAT ABOUT ELEVEN?!'

Don't panic. I'm writing an epilogue.

Stay tuned! Over and Out.